

MY CHRISTMAS MYSTERY.

From the London Telegraph.

For years I had spent Christmas with the Yarnolds, at their place down in Lincolnshire. Such a habit had this become that I never thought of Christmas except in association with the old manor-house which they lived in, and the wintry aspect of the pleasant scenery surrounding it. The understanding was that I should not wait for an invitation; but in the December of the year of which I am going to speak—a year not very remote—I did receive a letter from my old friends, couched in such warm, cordial terms that I could not have refused to accede to their wishes, whatever other arrangements I might have contemplated.

A special day was named for my going down, and I was advised to take the train leaving London at five in the afternoon, so that the carriage might meet me at the station when the train came in, and take me and my luggage on to the manor-house. To this I assented in my letter acknowledging the invitation, and so was not only pledged to spend the holidays at a particular place, but also to start on a given day, at a fixed hour.

These arrangements subsequently became important, because, had they not been entered into, I might not have gone to the manor-house that year. I certainly should not have started on the day agreed upon, for on the morning of that day a very unpleasant circumstance happened. The morning's post brought me a letter from a stranger, of rather a startling nature. It was in a woman's handwriting, and signed Martha Rathgrave. The letter commenced in fiercely indignant and upbraiding terms, and it charged me with cowardice and villainy. Then the tone changed to one of piteous appeal and entreaty. It is not necessary that I should set down the exact terms of the letter here; enough that, as I gathered, the writer was a frantic mother, whose daughter had been tempted from her home by some designing acquaintance, and who, distracted between indignation and misery, besought in hysterical and incoherent terms that as far as possible the injury might be repaired by the restoration of the misguided Agnes (that was the name given) to her home and friends.

The shock of such an epistle may be imagined. My astonishment at the receipt of it was unbounded. That it was intended for me there could be no mistake. My name appeared in full on the envelope, with my address—Hare court, Temple—and my name was repeated at the bottom of the fourth page in the name of the sender. Yet I had never heard the name of Rathgrave before; and as to being a party to the abduction of the unfortunate Agnes, the charge was simply ludicrous.

Martha Rathgrave wrote from Chertsey. Had the day been at my disposal I should certainly have started off at once in search of the lady, with a view of clearing up the mystery. But there was my packing, and I had fifty little matters to see about before the hour at which it was inevitable that I should catch my specified train. There was nothing for it but to write a letter, and I sat down for the purpose. I sat down; but under the circumstances a letter was a difficult thing to write. What could I say that would in any way satisfy Mrs. Rathgrave? To tell her that she was mistaken, and that I was not the man she supposed, would obviously to her mind be adding untruth to the catalogue of my misdeeds. She had called me a coward; I hesitated at convincing her that I was a liar.

While sitting pondering over this, I presently bethought me of an expedient. I could not go to Chertsey myself, but I could send a friend. Exactly; but who? I thought and thought, then suddenly I hit upon it. There was Gilbert Stone. The very man; young, smart, fond of adventure, and ever ready to do a man a service. Moreover he was easily to be found, his chambers were only in the next court. Without further reflection I resolved to take him into my confidence in this strange business, and to ask him to fathom the mystery for me.

With the open letter in my hand, I started off for Stone's chambers. They were on the fourth floor, and when I had mounted to the top of the gloomy staircase I found, to my disappointment, that his outer door was closed. Thinking it still possible that he might be there, I gave a sharp rap, but there was no response from within. The case was hopeless. I had decided this, and was about to turn away, when I heard somebody begin slowly to mount the stairs. It was a heavy, weary step, but came on steadily, round after round. I leaned over the balustrade, and was mentally contrasting the step with Stone's light, agile bound, when, to my intense astonishment, on the figure coming into sight, I recognized Stone himself. At the same moment he caught sight of me, and certainly his astonishment was not less than mine. He started and put out a hand against the wall to steady himself.

"What do you want?" he gasped in an angry tone.

"You're not well?" I rejoined, giving him question for question.

"Nonsense! Never better in my life. What is it?"

I said it would be necessary to go into some little explanation, and he then crawled up the few remaining steps, and putting his back against the stair-window, folded his arms, and intimated that he was ready to hear what I had to say. He seemed to have no intention of asking me into his chambers, and though I thought this odd, I would not appear to take any notice of it.

There is seldom too much light in the Temple in December, and this morning was specially gloomy. So, in the position Gilbert Stone had taken up, his face was wholly dark to me—I could not see a line of it. In a few words I explained what had happened, and proposed to read the letter. He nodded, and I went through it from end to end. He apparently listened intently; but when I had done, and had folded up the paper, he still retained his listening attitude; and it was only when I said, "Now, I want you to see into this for me, old boy," that he started up and replied, "With pleasure; give me the letter." I gave it into his hand.

"And you know nothing whatever of these people?" he asked.

"Absolutely nothing," he laughed.

"All right. You are the genuine victim of a mystery. Variable being! Well, enjoy yourself, old boy. Consider all this as good as squared. You'll hear from me. A merry Christmas to you!"

I reciprocated the wish; we shook hands, and I hurried away to prepare for my journey with a sense of relief. In a few hours, I felt certain, the unpleasant little mistake would be cleared up. Still, I felt anxious for Stone's letter. And that reminded me—I had not

told him where I was going. Well, no matter, I couldn't tell upon those stairs again; he must address me at my chambers, and his communication would be forwarded to Lincolnshire in due course.

And now I reach a portion of my narrative where it is necessary for me to observe the utmost exactness of detail, in order to gain credence for what I shall have to state. My packing was finished at 4:30; a cab then conveyed me and my portmanteau and hat-box to the Great Northern Terminus. The train starting at five was, as I knew, express to Peterborough, not stopping on the way; it ultimately reached Lincoln, the station nearest my destination, at nine that night.

There were not many passengers by that train. I noticed this myself, and it was confirmed by the guard, with whom I got into conversation; and who was kind enough to offer me a compartment to myself, in case I preferred it. I did prefer it, as I had some papers I wished to look over, and the guard showed me into a first-class carriage (No. 287), and locked the door to secure me against intrusion. As soon as we were fairly out of the terminus I took the bundle of papers I have mentioned from my pocket, determined to make the utmost of the rapidly fading light; for though the carriage lamps were lit, they were not pleasant to read by.

The oscillation of the carriage, as the train rumbled along at express speed, was irritating; not in spite of it, I soon managed to get absorbed in my work. For some twenty or thirty miles I read on and on, making myself master of the details of a somewhat intricate case which had been submitted to my judgment. Then a very natural thing happened. My mind reverted to the event of the morning, I suppose, and suddenly the name of Agnes Rathgrave began to intrude itself into my reading. The words mixed themselves up in an odd fashion with the writing before my eyes—gleamed and flashed there with such vividness that I began to lose myself in idle speculations about this unknown girl. Was she pretty, interesting in manner, loving in disposition? These and similar questions were bewildering me, when I was suddenly startled by a sound as of a deep groan close to my ear.

Though I believed myself alone in the carriage, I looked up sharply. Daylight was waning; but the lamps had in consequence brightened, and I had no difficulty in seeing about me with the utmost clearness.

Imagine my astonishment, then, when, on raising my eyes, I discovered that I was not the sole occupant of the compartment. Unquestionably, it was shared by a companion. The seat next to one to my own was occupied by a lady, who sat gazing intently out of the farther window. There could be no doubt about her being there, yet I felt certain that she had not entered the carriage at King's-cross, and it was quite impossible that she could have entered it since, while we were tearing along at express speed. My flash crept, and I felt a lifting of my hair as I looked at her; yet I did look at her very intently, so intently that I can recall every minute particular of her appearance and attire.

She was, so far as I can judge, not more than twenty years of age, petite in figure, with small, delicately-shaped hands and feet. As she wore a black veil shiny with bugles down to her mouth, the upper part of her face was hidden, but the lower portion was most delicately turned. Mouth and chin were beautiful; so was a little shell-like ear, of which I caught sight. But what struck me most forcibly was the snowy whiteness of the complexion; there was no flush in it; even the lips were bloodless. The lady's dress was plain to simplicity. She wore a black-and-white check silk, the skirt quite plain, and a short velvet mantle. Her bonnet was also of velvet, with a cluster of pansies in it over the left temple. I saw no jewelry. My attention was specially drawn to my companion's hands, from their unusual smallness and the exactness with which her gloves fitted. Moreover, she had a peculiarity of the left hand; she kept it tightly clinched, and I presently saw that her object in doing so was to retain fast hold of a crumpled fragment of paper; but the apparent tenacity of grip might, I decided, be unconscious, as she was clearly much self-absorbed.

Can I say that as I gazed at my companion I experienced a sense of terror? No; it hardly amounted to that, especially after the first shock of discovering that she was there. How she had come there, certainly puzzled me. It was most singular that after what had passed the guard should have admitted her. It was more singular still, that he should have been able to do so without my knowledge. On the other hand, there she was, sitting bodily before my eyes, as real and tangible as the carriage itself.

Beginning to smile at my own alarm, I presently mustered up courage enough to address the lady. Bending forward, I inquired whether she wanted the window down?

The noise of the train was so great that I could hardly hear my voice; but she heard it, and turning towards me, smiled graciously. Her lips also moved, and as she placed her right hand on the window-strap at the same moment, I understood her to answer me in the affirmative. So I bowed, leaned back in my seat, and tried to resume my reading. In this I was only partially successful. My eyes were constantly wandering towards my companion, who was again watching the fading landscape through her veil, while I speculated on the mystery of her being there.

"I will speak to the guard at Peterborough," I mentally determined.

As I did so our speed began to slacken, and, looking out, I saw that we were close upon the old town. The express stage of our journey was near its end. The beautiful facade of the cathedral was already in view. Within a few minutes we were entering the station. The platform was on my side the carriage (the reverse had been the case in starting at King's-cross); and as the place was shouted out, mingled with the cry of "tickets!" I noticed that my companion turned her face my way.

"You get out here!" I inquired.

She inclined her head.

I put my hand out to open the door for her. It was locked. At the same moment the collector came up and asked to see my ticket.

"This lady will get out here, if you will unlock the door," I said.

"Lady, sir? what lady?" I turned sharply to where my companion had been seated. She was gone!

"There was a lady seated in this carriage a moment ago," I stammered out.

moved on. As the station receded from view, and a sense of being alone again came over me, I nearly swooned with terror. There could be no blinking the truth to myself now—I had seen a ghost! It had appeared to me in that place; and, for all I knew, it might return. My eyes glared at the seat it had occupied. I dared not turn from it; I yet felt assured that should the phantom present itself again I should throw myself from the carriage in the very madness of terror. My only consolation was that the train stopped at the next station (Bolton), only a few miles distant, and there it would be practicable for me to get into another compartment—one in which there were booked and duly accredited human passengers.

The distance between Peterborough and Bolton was interminable, in my agony and alarm; but it was traversed without any fresh ghostly experience, and the instant the train stopped I leaped out. The relief of escaping was so intense that I could hardly stay to collect together my papers, rugs, and other trifles. A porter proffered assistance, and I gladly availed myself of it, though I had to put up with his astonished looks when he found I was only moving from one carriage to another, apparently without an object. I selected a compartment this time with plenty of life in it—two burly farmers and one afflicted old lady gave promise of security from further horror, and I was congratulating myself on the success of my move, when, just as the train began to move, the porter I had engaged came to the window and touched his cap.

"Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but does this belong to your papers? Found it on the seat of the other carriage."

He held out as he spoke a crumpled fragment of manuscript. I recognized it the moment I took it. There could be no mistake as to its being the fragment of paper my mysterious fellow-traveller had clutched so tightly in her hand!

The train had started, and it was impossible to give back the paper. It was not mine; I had no right to it; yet so peculiar was the chance that had given it in my possession, and so strangely was it connected with the most singular experience of my life, that I felt bound to preserve it. As the eyes of my companions were all upon me, in that undisguised stare common to country folk, I simply placed the fragment in my pocket-book, determined to examine it on reaching my journey's end.

My reception at the manor-house was so cordial, and it was so absolutely necessary to render myself agreeable among a household of guests, that my adventure almost passed out of my mind, until I found myself in the dead of the night alone in the sleeping-chamber which had been assigned to me. It was a great, old-fashioned, wainscoted room, with a huge chimney, in which the wind roared, and a bay window, opening among trees, that, now bare and gaunt, swayed their skeleton arms up and down before it with an incessant creaking in every joint. All the alarm I had felt in the railway carriage instantly came back to me with redoubled intensity. I found my eyes wandering from chair to chair, confident that I should presently see my ghostly companion seated in one of them. And instead of trying to banish this impression from my mind by reflecting on other things, I found the one subject drawing me to it with irresistible fascination. I could not even resist at that dismal hour the temptation to examine the paper in my pocket-book.

The sight of this, as I drew it out, gave me a turn; yet it was a very simple matter. A mere crumpled scrap of writing. I sat some time with it lying open in the palm of my hand, looking at it dreamily. Then an idea, suggested by the shape of the paper and the wrinkles in it, struck me. I said aloud, "This is a leaf of a letter." I said aloud, "A part held in a hand with a desperate clutch while the rest has been wrenched away. She must have held this in a death-grasp."

A gust of wind howled round the chamber, and moaned itself piteously away. The cold dew of terror came out in beads upon my brow.

It was some time before I could summon courage to undertake a minute examination of the writing before me. When I did it yielded little; there were only a few lines on one side of the paper, and they were broken and fragmentary. This was all I read:—"make you my wife, and I shall not forget \* \* \* your family impatience ruin all \* \* \* to be regretted." There was nothing more; all that might have rendered this an intelligible sentence had been torn away; as it was, the fragment was worthless. It told nothing, and how could it in any way throw a light on the mystery of the apparition which troubled me more and more as I reflected on it? Indeed, I felt that I dared not think over it too intensely; and though the ghostliness of the chamber (exaggerated by my imagination, no doubt) weighed heavily upon me, I boldly extinguished the light and threw myself on the bed, where, after a time, fatigue resulted in broken slumbers.

All next day I debated with myself whether I should take my host into my confidence in the matter of my railway mystery; but though Yarnold is a capital fellow, he is one of those sturdy, hard-headed, unsentimental yeomen with no possible belief in the supernatural, and I decided that he would only receive my statement with incredulity or open laughter; so I kept my counsel for that day. Next morning my letters were brought up to my room. Among them was only one which I had been put into an envelope which I had left directed with mylerk, so that he might forward them to the manor-house. The letters chiefly related to matters of business; but the last I opened had more special personal interest. It was the letter I had received from Gilbert Stone, and related to the commission he had undertaken.

Stone's communication was short—a mere note—but to the purpose. He had called the lady, Mrs. Rathgrave, had found her greatly concerned at her daughter's departure with some person unknown, but who appeared to have corresponded with the girl in my name, borrowed in all probability from the "London Directory," to which authority the mother had gone for my address. Stone added that he had effectually cleared up the mistake so far as I was concerned. He wrote in haste, as he was going off with a friend to spend his Christmas in the country.

"Thank goodness!" I ejaculated, "there is one mystery cleared up. Now, if I could only satisfy myself about my fellow-traveller."

I stopped abruptly. Surprise took away my breath; while speaking I had held Stone's letter in my hand, regarding it with a fixed and thorough gaze. Now, with a quick, lightning suddenness a discovery flashed upon me.

The writing on the fragment of paper which the woman had held in her grasp was identical with that of the letter before me!

No wonder I was mute with utter astonishment. Of course, the first impression yielded to doubt; but a close minute comparison of letter for letter decided me. The words I had read overnight were in Gilbert Stone's handwriting. What, then, did it all mean? What had happened?

I went down to breakfast, revolving those questions in my mind, and greatly perturbed.

Yarnold met me in the corridor; he had been reading his letters; there was a sheaf of them in his hand. His face was radiant.

"More guests, my boy!" he exclaimed, shaking the letters at me as we met. "By Jove! we shall have to get the manor-house enlarged by next Christmas."

"Indeed!"

"Yes; and as it is we shall have to quarter one of the new-comers on you—a friend of Sir Harry Finch's. You may know him, by the way; he is at the bar."

"Does Sir Harry mention his name?"

"Oh, certainly—let me see, yes; here it is—Gilbert Stone."

I was conscious of starting and changing color. Yarnold looked surprised, as he well might, for he could little guess the strange thoughts and misgivings which were already shaping themselves in my mind about the man whose name he had mentioned as about to come there as his guest. However, I submitted to his surprised looks, rather than make any statement as to the doubts and intrigues. They were, indeed, so vague that I could hardly have put them into words. I contented myself with remarking that I believed I knew Sir Harry's friend, and Yarnold himself, to my relief, soon changed the subject.

Three nights after, Gilbert Stone came down. His surprise at seeing me was naturally very great. I had not mentioned to him in town where I was going to spend my Christmas, and it certainly seemed a strange coincidence that his friend, Sir Harry Finch, should have brought him down to the same place. It was, though he did not suspect it, more than coincidence; it was destiny. He did not mention his letter transmitted to me that morning, and of course I said nothing about the discovery I had made, identifying the writing with that of the fragment left by my spectral companion in the railway train. In truth, little passed between us, for I fancied that, great as was his surprise at seeing me, his uneasiness was greater. Nor, I could tell, was this lessened on his hearing that it was my room he was to share. He started to be alarmed, but I saw that his lower lip dropped and quivered. I had already come to regard him with grave suspicion, and I determined to observe him closely.

There was dancing that night, and Stone threw himself into the amusement with enthusiasm—I thought with recklessness, if not desperation. Suddenly, when the gayety of the scene was at its height, I saw him give a hurried glance round the hall and steal away. I followed him, but at a distance. He ascended the stairs, and traversed the corridor leading to my room. His step was noiseless, and I pursued him like his shadow.

The room was full of moonlight. As he went in he thrust to the door, but did not close it. I stole up and looked in. He was stooping over a portmanteau, from which he took out a small writing-desk; a key attached to his watch-chain enabled him to open this. What could be his object? The moonlight was strong enough to show me that he took from the desk a handful of open letters. But a man does not leave the dance to read letters by moonlight. No, nor by lamplight; though while the thought was in my mind he struck a match and lit the taper by his side. Then he held out one of the letters towards the hardly-kindled flame, so that the corner of the paper almost ignited. His object, then, was not to read, but to destroy—to destroy something before I was there to observe his movements.

In the instant of my detecting that intention I was in the room, my right hand had firm hold of his wrist, and we were glaring at each other, eye to eye.

"Stay, Gilbert Stone!" I cried. "You destroy nothing?"

"Who will prevent me?" he demanded fiercely.

"I will!"

"And by whose authority?"

"That of the dead!"

His look changed, and he staggered from me. Then, with the courage of desperation, he summoned up all his strength and made a rush, seizing me by the throat. Our struggle was short and sharp; I threw him, and he lay at my feet glaring.

In the contest the letters had fallen and lay scattered about us. Among them was the one he would have destroyed in the flame. I recognized that at a glance, for it was much crumpled, and a half-circular piece had been torn out of the bottom of it. I hardly a second glance was necessary to convince me that I had in my pocket-book the missing piece, which would render it complete.

As Stone gazed at me with vicious eyes, I tore out my pocket-book, produced the fragment and fitted it into the letter, which it matched with exactness.

"How dare you come here to pry into my letters?" the man demanded, with an attempt at swagger.

"I have given you my authority," I replied; "it is that of the unhappy woman to whom you wrote the words—'You know that I have promised to make you my wife, and I shall not forget that promise when the proper time comes, unless you by your foolish impatience ruin all, bring disgrace upon your family, and lead yourself to an exposure that will assuredly have to be regretted.' Be reasonable, and confide wholly in your devoted adorer."

It will be seen that I pieced out the sense of the fragment (in italics) by means of the letter itself.

The horror of Gilbert Stone as I did so was intense, and was only exceeded when in a few words I told him how it had come into my possession. At that narrative all his manliness left him; he fell at my feet and abjectly implored my pity—my compassion. I reminded him that as yet I only suspected him of some offense dark enough to arouse the spirits of another world to rise up to avenge it.

"Yes," he exclaimed with a shudder, "it was she—it was Agnes."

"What! Agnes Rathgrave!" I cried in amazement.

"The same. It was to her that this letter was addressed."

I was bewildered, confounded, and I said so.

"You shall know all," he said, "but my lips burn—my throat is parched; I must have water—water."

He scrambled to his feet, and, going to the cistern, poured out a draught into a glass and gulped it down eagerly.

Then he entered on a deliberate confession, which revealed all. He admitted that it was he who had made advances to Agnes Rathgrave, but in my name, simply used as the first that occurred to him with a view to screen his own. In that name he had promised her marriage; and two nights before she had come to his chambers in mad desperation, bringing with her his letter, and threatening exposure unless he kept his promise. Her words were exasperating, his temper short, and he rushed on her and tried to tear the letter from her hand. Part he secured; but in the struggle she stumbled and fell backwards, bearing with her the small portion by which she held. That was fatal. To his horror the woman lay dead at his feet. "I see her now," he cried, putting his hands before his eyes, "lying there stiff in her silk dress, and with the short veil half hiding her dead face." He added that he sat gazing at the body half the night; then he thought him that there were empty chambers in the same court to which his key would

gain him admission. To those chambers he had carried the body through the darkness, and there it remained.

This statement fully accounted for the state of trepidation in which he met me on his stairs in the morning, and the readiness with which he undertook to clear up the Rathgrave mystery, about which he knew too much already. His subsequent letter to me was, of course, a lie. He had not seen Mrs. Rathgrave, having only too strong reasons for keeping out of her way.

"But I had managed it all so cleverly," he added, "that I might have got off unscathed if the poor dead wretch had only been laid at rest in a Christian grave. But she has appeared to you; she may appear to others, and it is useless to fight the dead."

He started up and pressed both hands tightly over his heart.

The color had gone from his face while he spoke, and I now saw that it was distorted and convulsed.

"You are ill!" I exclaimed. "Let me ring—"

"Too late, my boy, too late," he said faintly. "It is ten minutes since I drank the water—"

"Well?"

"It was poisoned."

He dropped forward on his face, and before assistance could come to him had breathed his last spasmodic breath, and was dead.

And thus the spirit of the murdered victim of his heartless cruelty and treachery was mysteriously avenged.

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